

Unsettling Ourselves: Some Thoughts on Non-Native Participation in Decolonization Work

By Matt Soltys

For seven years I have worked as a community organizer and ecological educator, trying to integrate an analysis of colonialism into my life and work. Recently I have worked with others in Guelph, Ontario, trying to prevent a 675-acre industrial development from surrounding an old growth forest. Our educational material consistently features an understanding of Indigenous territory, and we have built relationships with people in the nearby Six Nations reserve who also work to stop developments in their territory. This union has empowered our efforts and made the work more transformative for all involved. I write in this spirit of personal transformation and Earth's protection. Through this kind of work I have learned how colonialism permeates our reality, especially regarding environmental issues. And although Native people are affected disproportionately, I believe colonization impoverishes all of our lives.

The ecological impact of colonialism is inextricable from empire building, industrialism, large-scale deforestation and agriculture. Not long ago we could safely drink from nearly every lake, river, stream and spring, and we could hunt animals as a part of intact ecosystems. Today's world is very different. A quotation from the French Catholic missionary Joseph De La Roche D'Allion, written in 1627, describes a quality of life in what is now known as southwestern Ontario:

There is an incredible number of stags, great abundance of moose or elk, beaver, wild cats and black squirrels larger than the French; a great quantity of wild geese, turkeys, cranes and other animals which are there all winter. A stay there is quite recreating and convenient; the rivers furnish much excellent fish; the earth gives good grain, more than is needed. They have squashes, beans, and other vegetables in abundance.

Today this same land contains less than one per cent original forest and is dominated by industrial agriculture. Fish can be safely eaten only in small amounts, and fruit and nut trees are scarce. An autonomous existence has been stolen from us, and this ecological loss virtually guarantees our participation in the industrial economy.

Our lives are also socially impoverished due to colonialism. Consider this quotation, from another French Catholic missionary who spent time with the Hurons in the mid-1620s:

All the forests, meadows, and uncleared land are common property, and anyone is allowed to clear and sow as much as he/she will and can, and according to their needs, and this cleared land remains in their possession for as many years as they continue to cultivate and make use of it.

Contrast that with our current system, where we spend most of our waking hours working to pay for our mortgage, rent and taxes. Consider this: If you lived in a society like that quoted above, what would you do with your life?

The Power of Names

Colonization alters our reality through our language and sense of place. For example, the Bruce Peninsula's original name is the Saugeen Peninsula and is the traditional territory of the Saugeen Ojibway. The Saugeen Ojibway lived throughout the peninsula and as far south as Mount Forest before a series of coercive pressure tactics, primarily led by Sir Francis Bond Head, forced them to sign away more than 1.5 million acres. Now isolated on two reserves, the Chippewas of Nawash and Saugeen First Nation have an active land claim seeking the return of Crown land in the peninsula and financial compensation for treaty violations.

Nine million acres of the area that includes Algonquin Park, the Petawawa military

base, and downtown Ottawa is under an active land claim. This land is unsurrendered territory. Since the Algonquin nation did not sign a treaty with the British or Canadian government for this area, settlement and resource use is classified under international law as illegal.¹

Learning the history of the Saugeen Ojibway or the Algonquins, referring to the area as the Saugeen rather than the Bruce Peninsula, and learning how we can assist these nations' reparations is one way of decolonizing our language and sense of place. It is incumbent upon us to consider our responsibilities when we go to places like the Saugeen Peninsula and Algonquin Park, knowing that Indigenous people are fighting for the land.

Decolonizing our minds and our lives

Decolonizing our minds has a lot to do with outdoor education work, which has deep roots in ecology and bioregionalism. Some notable scientific and philosophical contributors to these movements include Arne Naess, Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Tom Brown, John Seed, Richard Louv and many more, all of whom advocate a land- or place-based identity. Shared among these philosophical roots is a de-identification with colonial mindsets and civilization, and a re-identification with the Earth—with the ecosystems that feed us and inspire us, with the land and watershed we call home. When someone asks us where we live, the simple act of describing the land or watershed rather than the name of the town can begin to transform our relationships.

Another way we can decolonize is to research our relationship with colonialism, both on this land and our ancestral homelands: Where do our ancestors come from, and how did they live? When, and how, were they colonized? If our ancestors came to this continent from elsewhere, how did they end up here?

Lastly, the larger process of social decolonization is a grand and increasingly urgent task. The Canadian government's land claim process is much too slow. The

very land to be reclaimed is being destroyed by new residential and commercial development, mining operations, and industrial agriculture. The slow pace of the Canadian government's land claims bureaucracy and the ever-rapid pace of capitalism leave many to wonder, what will be left?

It is this frustration that leads many to try and stop things before they get worse. In recent years Ontario has seen dozens of actions stop contentious projects—Caledonia in 2006; a quarry, police station, and residential development by Tyendinaga Mohawks; a uranium mine by Ardoch Algonquins; Dump Site 41 by Anishinabe and non-Natives; more than \$2 billion worth of developments by the Six Nations of the Grand River; a border crossing at Akwesasne; and many more.

All of these actions saw non-Natives engage in solidarity in some way, either by organizing understanding and support in their own communities, fundraising, legal support, media exposure, pressuring the government, standing on the front lines or organizing solidarity actions. Beyond those pertinent actions, all of us can contribute to social and cultural decolonization. When done right, this can build the relationships we need to rebuild trust between peoples. We need to protect this Earth, and we are better able to do so from an honourable place of mutual support, solidarity, and willingness to stand together.

¹ International documents recognizing the rights of Indigenous people to self-determination and control of their lands include sections of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Charter of the United Nations, the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the UN Resolution on Permanent Sovereignty over Natural Resources.

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